

The last chapter of the Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra also circulates as a separate text known as the Gandavyuha (Entry into the Realm of Reality) Sutra. The Gandavyuha Sutra details the journey of the youth Sudhana, who undertakes a pilgrimage at the behest of the bodhisattva Manjushri. Sudhana will converse with 52 masters in his quest for enlightenment. The antepenultimate master of Sudhana's pilgrimage is Maitreya. It is here that Sudhana encounters The Tower of Maitreya, which along with Indra's net is one of the most startling metaphors for the infinite to emerge in the history of literature across cultures.

In the middle of the great tower... he saw the billion-world universe... and everywhere there was Sudhana at his feet... Thus Sudhana saw Maitreya's practices of... transcendence over countless eons (kalpa), from each of the squares of the check board wall... In the same way Sudhana... saw the whole supernal manifestation, was perfectly aware it, understood it, contemplated it, used it as a means, beheld it, and saw himself there.

The penultimate master that Sudhana visits is the Bodhisattva Manjushri (Great Wisdom Bodhisattva). Thus, one of the grandest of pilgrimages approaches its conclusion by revisiting where it began. The Gandavyuha suggests that with a subtle shift of perspective we may come to see that the enlightenment that the pilgrim so fervently sought was not only with him at every stage of his journey, but before it began as well—that enlightenment is not something to be gained, but "something" the pilgrim never departed from.

The final master that Sudhana visits is the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Universal Worthy), who teaches him that wisdom only exists for the sake of putting it into practice; that it is only good insofar as it benefits all living beings.

When this is done, the world of the Gandavyuha (ceases) to be a mystery, a realm devoid of form and corporeality, for now it overlaps this earthly world; no, it becomes that "Thou art it" and there is a perfect fusion of the two... Samantabhadra's arms raised to save sentient beings become our own, which are now engaged in passing salt to a friend at the table and Maitreya's opening the Vairocana Tower for Sudhana is our ushering a caller into the parlor for a friendly chat.

In the 1960s Ko Un began to write a novel inspired by Sudhana's pilgrimage. After completing about half he stopped writing and only completed it in 1991, when he published . Brother Anthony translated this and it was published in 2005 with the title *Little Pilgrim*. The following pages are extracts from that translation.

## 1. Dawn Over the Son River

The river was beginning to loom into view beyond a cluster of hibiscus trees hanging in a drunken stupor. It flowed quickly in the early morning light, the sound of its rippling subdued. For little Sudhana, that glimpse of the river constituted his first awareness of the world as he regained consciousness.

"He's alive!" Manjushri rejoiced. The old man had rescued the child the evening before, as the boy floated close to the riverbank. All night long, the aged Manjushri had kept watch beside him on the sandy shore of the vast triangular reach where the Son River united with a small tributary before flowing down to join the Ganges.

They were in the northern regions of what is now called India. All the nation's frontiers and fortresses were in a state of unprecedented alert. King Virudhaka had determined to wipe the entire Shakya clan of Kapilavastu from the face of the Earth. The barbarity with which he conducted his campaigns had left the shores along the tributaries of the Ganges littered with corpses. All the farmland had been laid waste, every building razed. Walls that had taken generations to build were toppled, broken fortifications lay spread across the region. Every night the ruins rang with fearful screams. Theft, rape, and murder were commonplace among those who survived.

The whole Son River valley was once a thick forest of sal trees but they had all been burned to ashes. Sudhana had been born and raised at an estate deep inside the sal forest. As the fighting neared, Sudhana's nurse had bound the sleeping child to a raft made out of some bits of rough wood and set him floating down the river. Sudhana's entire family had perished in the flames that consumed their great manor house.

Sudhana's body might have washed into the sea, if not for Manjushri. The old man had been out admiring a spectacular sunset. The seventy-two-year-old Manjushri had once seen the Buddha himself touched by the beauty of a sunset, and he was seized with emotion at that memory. The ultimate beauty of

that fading light gave him yet deeper faith in the truth of the Buddha's words: "All things vanish in splendor. All things in themselves are evanescent." Just then, his old companion Parthivi had come rushing up. Parthivi fell on his knees in front of the aged sage, rose, and stood pointing towards the river. Manjushri followed Parthivi with the slow steps of an old pilgrim. The monsoons had set in and the river had swollen, spreading wide beyond its banks. It was flowing very fast. Darkness was spreading over the twilit Son basin.

"Over there, Master!"

Parthivi pointed towards the sandy shore further along the river's edge. The plank-built craft was no masterpiece of shipbuilding, to be sure, but it seemed sturdy enough. Still, the little boy who lay tied on top of it appeared to be dead.

"I saw it being swept down," Parthivi whispered. "So I swam out and brought it in. I could hear a faint sound of crying coming from the boat, you see. And look, he's still breathing!"

Manjushri peered at the small boy. "Ah, what a jewel of a child! Let's carry him into the quiet of the camp. He needs to be cared for."

An all-night vigil kept Sudhana warm. Then, in the dim light of early dawn, he opened his eyes.

"The world's all dark," he murmured. "The Himalaya's snowy peaks must have died!" He gazed toward the river. Manjushri's companions were busily rolling up the tents of their little encampment, but stopped when they heard the boy speak.

"This little fellow knows all about snowy peaks!" One of the men laughed. "Mountains dying! Who ever heard of such a thing?"

Manjushri stayed silent for a moment, then replied: "A child knows everything, just as a river at dawn knows everything. The reeds and trees along the banks of the Son know that the far-off Himalayas are dark. To know one grain of the sand on this shore is to know the whole universe." He spoke in a low voice, as if eager not to interrupt the river's murmur.

"What's your name, Grandad?" the little boy whispered, his voice hoarse. "I'm called Sudhana."

Manjushri contemplated the child. "I'm called Manjushri."

"Do you live near here? Why is there no hair on your head?"

"I always live by the roadside."

"By the roadside? With no house?"

"No; my home is in the sleeping fields, under the sleeping trees, beside the sleeping river."

"Where am I, Grandad?" Bewildered, Sudhana tried to clear his eyes.

"Well," Manjushri said gently, "this is a sandy beach at the lower end of the Son River. I was here only once before myself, about ten or so years ago. But the fighting hasn't reached here, so it's quiet. In the days to come, we're hoping to care for people who have suffered from the war."

"I want to go home," Sudhana cried out in the ringing tones of the Son Valley. "There's plenty to eat there, and lots of servants, and elephants to ride on." Sudhana tried to sit up. "Where am I?" he asked again.

The old man had a vision of Sudhana's home—the palatial mansion built of stone blocks carted down from mountain quarries, filled with every kind of treasure—turned to a heap of smoking rubble. He opened his eyes and the vision faded, replaced with Sudhana's weary young face.

"No," Manjushri said quietly, "there's no call for you to go back there. I'll show you the way you must go." He pulled Sudhana to his feet. Sudhana stumbled slightly and then was astonished to find that he could stand perfectly well. He had regained his full health and strength.

Manjushri took his arm. "Look at that old sal tree branch. That branch is showing you the way. Now go, Sudhana."

The sage bowed towards the tree with joined hands, whispered a few words in Sudhana's ear, and then he gave the boy a gentle shove in the back, as if pushing a boat off from the shore. Morning broke, and Sudhana the orphan found himself alone in the world.

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### **32. The Song of Avalokiteshvara**

Mount Potalaka, in the southern Indian realm of Marigukta, was surrounded by a whole community of thickly clustered towns and villages. It was more a towering world than a mountain. Sudhana arrived at an ancient village on the mountain's southern side, flanked by ancient trees of vast girth. The whole area radiated a spiritual aura. In the village, there were quite a number of people older than ninety years old. The villagers were so old that when a child was born there, people said its face took on adult features immediately. Villagers claimed that no newborn baby was ever heard crying in their town.

Sudhana considered growing old there, before reminding himself that the hermit had given him a mission. "I'm not going to grow old here. I'm on my way to meet the bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara."

An old servant in the village directed him a little farther to the west. He asked some washerwomen in the next village. They replied that he should go just a little farther. Since "a little farther" proved to be quite a distance, he had the whole day to prepare for his meeting with Avalokiteshvara.

The long walk made him thirsty, and he started walking toward the sound of running water. A stream flowed through a ravine on one side of the mountain. Pushing through the brush, he drank a few gulps. He would have liked to drink more, but he recalled a tramp's advice: a traveler must never fill his stomach with water.

A shadow was floating on the rippling stream. He turned and looked up. The bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara, stood above him. A tangled mob of other bodhisattvas clustered behind. Over the bodhisattva's shoulders hung a shawl of simple woven cloth. Sudhana joined his hands in greeting and bowed low.

"Welcome."

Avalokiteshvara spoke. "Last night in a dream, a hermit from the north came and told me your name. So you are Sudhana."

Sudhana rejoiced.

"I am a flower, you are a flower bud. Welcome."

The hermit had warned Sudhana that Avalokiteshvara might appear in any of thirty-three different forms. Avalokiteshvara was an incarnation of the compassionate love that delivers all creatures from suffering, the hermit had taught him. If the bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta stamped his foot once, the entire Buddha cosmos trembles, but when Avalokiteshvara revealed himself to living creatures, he adjusted his form to the ability of each person he met. By the multiple forms of his various incarnations, he showed how light, sound, smell, taste, and each phenomenon were all sources of bodhisattva enlightenment. With his thousand hands and thousand eyes, there was no place in this world that he couldn't touch and see. In one head he had eleven faces, so that he could perceive at the same time the world in all six directions—above and below, before and after, left and right. Such is the bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara. He is at the same time present in the faraway Western Paradise and in this world. He was also a poet singing in the last limitless regions of southern India. Sudhana encountered the bodhisattva in his most essential form, known as the "Sacred Avalokiteshvara."

After praying to the bodhisattva in his heart Sudhana spoke: "Holy bodhisattva, how can a bodhisattva achieve enlightening works and advance along enlightening paths?"

"I abolish people's fears," Avalokiteshvara answered, "I stand at the left hand of Amitabha in that world beyond, to ensure that when creatures fly from this world to the world beyond, no fear remains. Equally, for all this world's creatures, I banish fear in terrible situations, banish fear from extreme situations, banish fear of death, fear of wicked kings and powerful lords. I banish fear of poverty, fear of sickness, fear of shame and disgrace, of idleness and darkness. In addition, I banish fear of the way things change and are changing, lovers' fears of parting, fear of encountering an enemy, fear that makes heart and body tense, all the fear felt as anxiety and concern, the fear of not having what one longs for, and the fear of wandering in bad places. I banish them all."

As he heard these words, Sudhana's whole body was filled with new strength. He longed to repeat the words he had just heard and make them his own. But the bodhisattva began to sing:

You have reached this place, son of the wind,  
child whose heart and body are unclad.  
You are circling around me. I am ever in this mountain.  
If I am not utter compassion, I am not who I am.

I am in this mountain, in its diamond caverns.  
My body empty yet full of every kind of pearl.  
Hosts of heavenly gods, the dragon god, Asura demon,  
the ghosts of Chin and Garura and Najol,  
those kith and kin keep me company on my lotus-flower throne.

You, young pilgrim, breath of wind,  
with your heart now prostrate at my feet,

have come all this way to meet me  
in order to float on the ocean of virtue like a sailing ship.

To learn enlightening deeds from me,  
to gain the enlightening deeds of the northern bodhisattva  
Samantabhadra,  
you never weary in distant journeys.  
I am duly bound to learn from you  
the practice of pure, deep, intrepid compassion.

Look, what seems a net of light, light spreading far,  
broad, broader, spreading wide, spreading wide as the void:  
that wide-spreading my power bestows.  
Blessings, a hundred-fold, at once majestically adorn this world.

You have come this far, breath of wind,  
you have come here with your heart profound.  
I touch your brow and at once, like you,  
like a long-traveling pilgrim,  
I long to throw open wide for you the gateways of liberation.  
We two are together here in the midst of truth.

Tell me, where can a doorway be a doorway?  
The doorway too is merely a cloud.  
Majestic cloud, regarding all living things with pity.  
Vast cloud, open wide.

Having completed every vow,  
I long to become one with every human sorrow,  
to sacrifice myself for love.  
I undergo endless pain and distress,  
yet whoever calls my name is delivered of all pain.

Listen, pilgrim child.  
In prison or fettered in chains,  
shackled, face to face with an enemy,  
those who invoke my name  
will find their sufferings vanish like the wind.

Listen, all who are condemned to die.  
When the executioner wields his sword,  
and your soul is about to leave the body,  
if you invoke my name,  
the sword will melt and turn into water.

When a close friend or neighbor suddenly becomes your foe  
and turns against you, invoke my name.  
Then all bitterness melts and flowers bloom on riverbanks.

Little pilgrim child, breath of wind,  
when life in this world is ended  
and you are born into the Pure Land Paradise,  
if you want to move without constraint, invoke my name.  
Invoke my name a single time, pilgrim,  
attaining perfection of desire.

As for you, my child, Sudhana, breath of wind,  
long ago I was like you.  
In order to help and save all living creatures  
in every world under three thousand skies,  
I formulated great vows and daily fulfilled them.

Sudhana,  
your task is to move through all the worlds in ten directions,  
attending each master you meet.

Listen with ears of wisdom,  
behold with eyes and body full of compassion,  
and if this task brings you joy,  
you are already a son of truth.  
Sudhana, little breath of truth's own wind.

When finished, Avalokiteshvara was silent for a while, then beckoned Sudhana closer. The bodhisattva began to talk quietly, like a grandfather.

"As I was singing, you received all my teaching. I have entered the gates of bodhisattva liberation but could not pass beyond the works of a bodhisattva Mahasattva. How can I live forever in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha? I came from other places and only very late came rushing into the Buddha's teachings. How can I always be practicing Buddha works?"

Sudhana perceived the bodhisattva's immense virtue; he had set aside all his majesty and with complete humility of heart put himself lower than all living creatures to serve them all. Sudhana's heart was full of joy after hearing the bodhisattva's song and he longed to respond. He rose, then knelt with his right knee on the ground and bowed to touch the bodhisattva's feet. A poem came bursting out of him:

Beings of this world, the six worlds,  
the heavens, too, all together,  
the demon asuras, the host of bodhisattva Mahasattvas,  
all together, join in praise, give praise and say:  
"Holy Buddha's wisdom is vaster than the ocean."  
Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, my master,  
succoring all living creatures everywhere equally,  
before you, all suffering is mere dew.  
You can carry the earth away.  
You can dry up the seas.  
You can break down great mountains  
and spread out plains.  
Oh, holy, compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara,  
how with this worthless infant heart  
shall I ever praise enough  
such great wisdom and such virtue?  
Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, my master,  
joining with all who have been brought to understanding,  
I will praise your exalted majesty.  
With all my heart I serve and I revere you.  
When Mahabrahman was in his heavenly realm,  
Mahabrahman's light set fire to his whole heaven.  
Now your essential nature rises in full splendor  
in the midst of this world's living creatures.  
Face like the full moon rising,  
appearance like the rainbow after rain,  
like Mount Sumeru soaring,  
like the morning sun rising above the southern sea,  
dazzling joy of bodhisattva being,

of deer running in meadows in the Deccan Plateau,  
Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, my master,  
like campaka and golden flowers growing together,  
like white pearls strung on a necklace,  
you are a flower, a flower.  
In union with you  
we cannot help but obtain incomparable bodies,  
the whole world cannot help but hear  
the sound of Buddhas and bodhisattvas breathing.  
Others, coming after me,  
have already entered truth  
so I have this task of praise.

The moment Sudhana's poem ended, the bodhisattva leaped up and caught Sudhana's light body in his arms. In embracing that one small boy, he was embracing the whole world. The bodhisattva's joy was a heaven born of earth. If sorrow is the tears of earth born in heaven, that joy is the bliss of the bodhisattva who loves all creatures. Sorrow is the pain of the bodhisattva who loves all creatures. The bodhisattva's joy is at the same time his sorrow. Such is compassion.

Sudhana and Avalokiteshvara walked together through the mountain's glorious flowers, with the bees and butterflies. They were making their way back to the bodhisattva's lotus-shaped throne when an earthquake shook the mountain.

"He's coming!" the bodhisattva said, gazing up into the indigo-colored sky. "The bodhisattva Ananyagamin must be on his way. He always arrives like this."

Coming to this world from the empty reaches of space to the east, Ananyagamin touched the earth, landing with one toe on the loftiest summit of Mount Cakravada. The bodhisattva of the new world in the eastern reaches of space had arrived. Ananyagamin had the power to put to flight the six worlds' trillion aeons of sufferings and seeds of pain. Avalokiteshvara addressed Sudhana: "Did you see Ananyagamin the bodhisattva come into this world?"

Sudhana nodded.

"Now you must go to him and assist him, learning more of the deeds to bring enlightenment."

"I will follow what you say. When night falls, I will ask the starlight the way to find him."

Sudhana left Avalokiteshvara and walked along a narrow grassy path at the foot of Mount Potalaka. At the point where that grassy track joined a highway, Ananyagamin the bodhisattva was waiting. If an enlightened being happens to be somewhere, it is not that they are living there; they are simply waiting for someone to arrive, just as in a big marketplace you will always find water waiting to extinguish a fire.

"Teacher, teacher," Sudhana called, "I'm full of the food the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara has just given me. But still I'm looking for more. I have passed through innumerable previous lives of gluttony, and I've inherited their effects."

"Hello, little pilgrim."

"Teacher, what world have you come from? From how far away? When were you last on earth?"

Ananyagamin spoke quietly, as if to himself: "Little pilgrim, you have already learned all there is to learn, you are fully fed. My words will make no difference. Yet saying just one word makes birds fly in the sky. Where did I come from and how long since I was last here? Those terms are foreign to me. The questions are so deep that all this world's brahmins and monks together can never find the answer. None but a bodhisattva can know. I came here from a world in space to the east plentifully supplied with good things. But since one aeon is a speck of dust, and one speck of dust ten thousand aeons, how can anyone tell how long it is since I was here before? Even I don't know. Head south from here. There's an ancient city there, where Mahadeva, the lord of heaven, is waiting for you."

Sudhana had forgotten that Avalokiteshvara had a thousand hands and thirty-three bodily forms, but he felt he had met this bodhisattva before. The same perfume emanated from both Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of this world, and Ananyagamin, the bodhisattva from a different dimension.

"Two masters, each from different worlds!" Sudhana thought. "But since the same perfume comes from both, they are one, after all. Fresh shoot of grain emerging, bearing two seedling leaves, the old life in that other world all done, now a new infant world has come into being."

These encounters left Sudhana exhausted and he did not at once set out southward towards the city of Dvaravati as Ananyagamin had told him. He let go of mind and body, dropping them to the ground.

"If I've not learned all the truth in this world from the masters I've met so far, I'll not learn it all from the masters I meet in the future, either. I'd like to have some fun," he thought. "Playing in this water here, I'm going to enjoy myself."

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#### **54. A Teacher from the Next World**

Although Sudhana had set out along a level highway, he found that the very foot of the majestic tower was swathed in a mass of clouds. Sudhana had slept through the night at the foot of the tower. An elderly man was busy sweeping up scattered fragments of cloud. Finding that to be an odd sort of employment, Sudhana cautiously ventured a question: "Are those clouds you're sweeping up?"

The man kept sweeping.

"They are clouds, aren't they?" Sudhana persisted.

"You sloughed off scab of a guest, can't you use your eyes? If these aren't clouds, what are they?"

Sudhana felt snubbed: "In that case, we must be up in the mountains!"

"You think this is a mountain? Not at all. This is the outer yard of the inner courts of Tushita heaven. The topmost pinnacle of the Hall of Vairochana's Solemn Adornments rises in this garden. You thought you were walking along an ordinary road, but it wasn't, it was the road to heaven. Clouds are sometimes called the shadows of wisdom, but sometimes they're just the dregs of obscurity."

Sudhana was completely at a loss. Could he really have taken a road leading up to heaven? During his travels in the south, he had heard a report that Maitreya had fallen sick and died while still only a child, after a short life marked by wonderful talents, asceticism, and compassion. So was the Maitreya Bodhisattva in this Tushita heaven a bodhisattva yet to be born into the present world? Or was he now a bodhisattva waiting for the next age, having already died one last time and returned to his home here? A voice, seeming to come out of one of the building's pillars, provided a response:

This tower is a place drawing one aeon into all, all aeons into one.

This tower is a place drawing one world into all, all worlds into one.

This tower is a place drawing one dharma into all, all dharmas into one.

This tower is a place drawing one creature into all, all creatures into one.

This tower is a place drawing one Buddha into all, all Buddhas into one.

The little pilgrim ceased to consider it strange that he was up in the sky, here in Tushita heaven. Inspired by the voices emerging from the pillars, Sudhana became a poet and began to improvise a set of fifty-five new canticles.

Just as Sudhana had finished singing, Maitreya returned to the Tushita heaven from the world below. The young Maitreya came accompanied by a phoenix with golden wings and a snake-headed mahoraga. He was surrounded on all sides by heavenly beings—dragons, the four heavenly kings who guard Indra's Brahma heaven, and a hundred thousand living creatures. The bodhisattva Sudhana had come to meet arrived after him and came to him from outside, not inside the tower.

Advancing before him, Sudhana fell at his feet. Immediately, Maitreya spoke Sudhana's praise in a thunderous voice, reciting no less than one hundred and twenty canticles. On first meeting this nameless, wandering child, he had responded to the child's praises by far longer hymns of praise. It was a moment of intense emotion.

"Bodhisattva, oh, bodhisattva," Sudhana kept whimpering and could not help breaking into tears. As he wept, he made repeated prostrations, innumerable prostrations. He had never made so many in his life before. Each prostration was full of multiple other prostrations so that in the end he must have made tens of thousands.

Sudhana could feel that Maitreya would one day emerge as the ultimate Buddha of Love. Then he would redress this present world and reveal it as a world made new, emerging as the Buddha of the Dragon Blossom World as it opens towards infinity in all directions, seated beneath the *Naga-pushpa*, Dragon Blossom Tree. For the time being, Maitreya would travel here and there, visiting every place, while the suffering of creatures grew more intense. The creation of a new world could never come about without wandering and fumbling. The chaos the cosmos experienced in its initial myriad of aeons was no different.

Maitreya Bodhisattva led little Sudhana toward the Hall of Vairochana's Solemn Adornments, the door of which opened at a snap of his fingers. There, everything belonged to the world of the innumerable. There

are no words to describe the stately jeweled palaces and balustrades within it, while innumerable udumbara flowers, innumerable padma blossoms, innumerable kumuda flowers, and innumerable pundarika flowers bloomed in gorgeous profusion. There were drawings portraying the course of Maitreya's present and past lives, that could all be taken in at a glance, as well as portrayals of the innumerable forms in which he had manifested himself. And more. Far more.

Maitreya Bodhisattva at once included Sudhana among his followers, uniting him with them in one community by a blazing shaft of light. They breathed in harmony together, in such extreme joy that clouds of light blazed from his every pore, billowing forth like drifting clouds. Yet Maitreya knew he could not retain the young pilgrim at his side. He was obliged to send the wanderer on his way, for after this he still had to meet his first teacher one more time, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, and his last, Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Practice.

As Sudhana left Maitreya, first circumambulating him several times to the right and bowing to touch his feet, their two childhoods had become one. That oneness would bring about his meeting with Manjushri. Their relationship stretched far into the future, so now Maitreya, for whom this parting was far from easy, placed his beloved Sudhana in a cloud chariot and sent him back Earthwards.

As he approached the Earth, Sudhana gazed down at the Himalayas, spread in a majestic panorama below him. As he dropped towards the Earth's lacework of rivers brimming with pure water, Sudhana made a promise to himself: "In order to hear one single word of doctrine spoken by the Buddha concerning bodhisattva works, I am prepared to hurl myself into a Buddha cosmos full of flames and endure the torment of the fire."

The surface of the world was a sad and lovely place.

Sudhana's heart was beating faster than ever, faster than a sparrow's heart: he was going to meet his first teacher, the Bodhisattva Manjushri. At last! Maitreya had just returned from spending time with Manjushri and Sudhana had fully agreed, with nothing either to add or subtract, with all the praises of his first teacher he had heard during his time in the Tushita heaven.

The more Sudhana's mind was filled with thoughts of Manjushri, his first teacher, the more those coincided with thoughts of young Maitreya. Now that Maitreya Bodhisattva, his most influential teacher, had become his friend, Sudhana's heart grew increasingly alert.

Sudhana had reached the point where a meeting with Manjushri had become inevitable. A long-lasting affection had preserved the innocence of both master and pupil.

Sudhana recalled Maitreya's words in praise of Manjushri, addressed to the deep recesses of his heart.

"Good boy, little pilgrim. I will show you what kind of bodhisattva your teacher Manjushri is. I will show you how he has penetrated the practice of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva and become perfect."

Maitreya had caressed the little pilgrim's head and shoulders as if he were his own brother as he spoke. He had delivered a solemn eulogy, yet spoken in tones light as the sound of a babbling stream.

"The vow made by Manjushri Bodhisattva lies beyond the reach of the other ten thousand billion myriads of bodhisattvas. Ah, little Sudhana, his practice and perfect performance are amazing, while his vow has been so often repeated it knows no bounds. He is a bodhisattva indeed. His wisdom does not mean he is foolish in human terms; he is a bodhisattva in whom wisdom is exactly identical with physical reality.

"What person is there, no matter how senior, who can go down to the lowest place and fetch up the highest wisdom, as Manjushri Bodhisattva has done? Manjushri Bodhisattva has been the mother of ten thousand billion myriads of Buddhas, the teacher of ten thousand billion myriads of bodhisattvas. He was not content to stop at that degree of wisdom. From ancient days in times long past he has entered into a state of liberation and fulfilled all the works of Samantabhadra, until none can tell which is Manjushri and which Samantabhadra."

Sudhana recalled the sound of Maitreya's voice. It had made Sudhana's heart tremble, dropping ever lower at first, like a rushing stream, then like the whisper of the wind scouring mountain heights, or like raucous voices of farmers outside city walls as they celebrate with songs, after harvesting the corn, shaking their shoulders and dancing in circles.

Joy at the prospect of meeting Manjushri and sorrow at parting from Maitreya mingled in Sudhana as he boarded a skiff at twilight to cross the Ganges, at a point where its width was not too great. The oar creaked and spread a pattern of ripples over the flowing water. Fish rose, made slurping noises, then sank again. They seemed to be bidding him welcome and he greeted the little creatures in return.

Sudhana headed for a village where lights were already shining here and there in the dusk across the silent riverside lands. He did not bother to go in quest of a place to sleep. He found a mound of straw, onto which he simply threw himself. When Sudhana awoke, a pair of eyes was gazing down at him; they belonged



to the daughter of the nearby house.

“There are two empty rooms in our house, and yet you sleep here like this?”

The girl seemed to be reproaching him, even as she expressed her pity.

“Thank you for your concern.”

“What concern? We deserve a severe punishment for not having welcomed a visitor correctly. I’m going to prepare breakfast for you; I beg you not to refuse. Come along. First you can wash your face.”

He followed the girl into the house. It was a prosperous house, not brahman or ksatriya caste, but its tidy yard was full of the simple dignity of those frugal folk who treasure every last grain of corn, in the belief that it is theirs as a gift from above.

Sudhana hungrily ate the food he was offered. Sumanamukha was still far away.

### **55. Meeting while Far Apart**

Sudhana spent one more night in that place. The daughter of the family inhabiting the main house was a cheerful girl, bubbling with memories of previous lives. She gave Sudhana new clothing as simply as if they had been brother and sister.

“Those clothes you’re wearing are too shabby for someone going back to visit their teacher. You should have new clothes, ready to contain a new heart.”

Sudhana was puzzled. Still, as soon as the girl had put the clothes down and gone out, he changed into them. They seemed to have been made for him. His body adjusted to its new dress.

“That’s better. Now you are ready to meet your first master again. You met him before, by the stupa in Salavana, the sal tree grove necropolis near Kushinagara. When you are in old clothes, no fresh joy arises on meeting truth or teachers.”

“What? Have you seen my master the bodhisattva Manjushri? How do you know that I am his disciple?”

She merely laughed in reply. Sudhana took his leave of the girl and soon arrived in front of a huge dolmen, half a day’s walk from Sumanamukha city in the land of the Universal Gateway. From the slope where it stood, there was a wide view out over any number of rivers, marshy swamps, and plains. The view was made more striking by the almost complete absence of trees. Sudhana wondered where the Buddha’s monastic community of disciples might be now, that band of followers founded by the sage from the Shakya clan. No doubt his teacher Manjushri must be among them as they moved on, never able to stay in one place, like a ship on the river.

Sudhana awoke from these thoughts that seemed to rise echoing from the vast plains lying before his eyes. Now his heart’s deep longing was all centered on his first teacher. His daily existence had always been directed toward the future, yet now everything else was powerless before the memory of that moment in the distant past when he had met the master, a tiny wartime orphan in a grove surviving alongside the ruins left by war.

He was longing for his teacher, when suddenly his master’s hand stretched out from a far-off place, one hundred and ten *yojanas* away, and caressed his head as he stood there. A teacher is always in touch with his pupil, and the love between them has such power that it sometimes seems the master could caress his pupil’s head from far away as if he were close beside him. Now that had become a reality—and not only his teacher’s hand; his voice echoed from very nearby, between the sound of their breathing.

“Well done!” How Sudhana had been longing to hear those two words. “Well done, Sudhana. As long as you live you will be able to fashion skeletons with piles of stones and teach them the way of harmony. The day will come when one by one those stone skeletons will come to life and dance for joy at the law of the identity of all things you have attained.”

Sudhana felt embarrassed but was obliged to hear his master speak his praises.

“If you had not possessed deep vows and belief, how could you have survived the long ordeal of visiting all those teachers in the southern realms? Surely, at some point, you would have turned aside and given up, overwhelmed with immense fatigue. Or you might have been content to make do with the few fruits harvested in the course of a small number of visits, giving up the ascent of the mountains on which the greater fruits are found.

“If that had happened, you would never have been able to do the works contained in the nature and principles of the Dharma, never have been able to perform the works involved in coming to know everything, knowing a little, knowing deeply, and then knowing the essence so completely that you enter and possess it. Sudhana. Well done!”

[ . . . ]

## 56. One Drop of Water in the Sea

In the Buddha's solemn assemblies, Manjushri's wisdom always shone out on his left, while on his right, Samantabhadra's will for action reached towards the darkneses of all living creatures. For the little pilgrim, encountering his first teacher, Manjushri Bodhisattva, at the end of his long journey through every kind of storm and vicissitude, came above all as the confirmation of the truth he had discovered. Sensing acutely how important it was, Sudhana's emotion was such that he was unable to make any distinction between the two bodhisattvas, uniting the wisdom of Manjushri with the practice and love of Samantabhadra. Great Wisdom, Great Liberation, Great Pity, Great Practice, if divided, always blend into one again.

When Manjushri, Sudhana's first teacher, advised him to meet Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, Sudhana was filled with a childlike yearning; he gave him advice now not as a teacher but as a bodhisattva and his equal in bodhisattva standing. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva! At present he had no further need of hymns. This was *bhutatathata*, the essential thusness, beyond all words, that constitutes the fundamental enlightenment.

In this present world, Samantabhadra had been born as the son of a mixed-race family of farmers, the third grade of the *vaysya* caste, and he had passed through a number of ascetic sects before converting to Buddhism and becoming the bodhisattva of practice. He, the foremost of all bodhisattvas together with Manjushri, not only possessed all the virtues of practice and action, he could even lengthen lives. He was usually depicted mounted on a white elephant or meditating, sitting on a lotus flower throne.

It so happened that once, when the Buddha was already growing old, he was on the point of leaving the Sitavana grove that formed part of the cremation ground just outside the royal capital where he had been staying; it was a place inhabited by the low castes. Someone set loose two mad elephants outside the north gate of the city, in the hope that they would trample him to death.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva had saved his teacher in that moment of crisis, uprooting an old tree and blocking the path of the maddened elephants as they came charging towards his master. A nightmare from the previous night had repeated itself in reality; Samantabhadra's very dreams were acts of *samadhi*.

By now, Sudhana's longing for his fifty-third encounter, that with Samantabhadra, had reached such intensity that it began to shine in his heart like a bright beacon of fire. He saw Samantabhadra's image contained in the flames. Sudhana was filled with wonder, as he attained a new stage of bodhisattva life, *dharmamegha*, where the clouds of Dharma drop endless dew.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva now appeared before him, sitting on a lotus throne before the Buddha. The throne was the same as the one on which the Buddha sat, for he served the Buddha known as the cosmic Buddha, *Vairochana*, while he himself held the rank of a *nirmanakaya*, a Buddha incarnate in human form.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva was surrounded by a crowd of some two thousand disciples. At the center of the crowd there were bodhisattvas, celestial beings, monks, nuns, and lay devotees of both sexes. They included a cluster of children even younger than Sudhana, gazing up at Samantabhadra as they sucked milk from their young mothers' breasts.

Sudhana stood in the midst of this assembly, as Samantabhadra delivered a sermon on the opening section of the Garland Sutra. As soon as he had finished, he stretched out a hand and caressed Sudhana's head.

"You've come at last! Good, very good boy!"

The words were accompanied with a smile full of love and joy. He climbed down from the lotus throne where he had been sitting, in token that he was welcoming Sudhana as a fellow bodhisattva. They and all the people assembled about them broke into rapturous smiles.

"Sudhana, Sudhana Bodhisattva!" Samantabhadra spoke the young pilgrim's name as if in confirmation. Then he murmured to himself, "How lovely the world is, with such a bodhisattva in it!" He turned to Sudhana. "When did you see me before?"

Sudhana was almost too immersed in joy to reply. His reply was his joy. "I saw you when I first saw Manjushri Bodhisattva."

"That is very true."

It was time to eat. The community only ate once a day, shortly before midday. With bodhi trees casting their shade across the dry grass, the place was not too hot. Samantabhadra gave Sudhana a share of the food, which members of the crowd had received by begging. It was rough fare, and there was very little of it, yet all—bodhisattva and monks and laypeople—began to eat contentedly. Sudhana duly followed suit and

ate. The bodhisattva chewed each mouthful a hundred times before swallowing, and every time he swallowed, he looked at Sudhana and smiled brightly.

“While we are eating, there are many people starving. Helping them, giving them food, is part of the bodhisattva’s task.”

Until now, Sudhana had never heard such words. Bodhisattvas and teachers had all spoken about “dharma” and “truth” or “the universe.” They had mentioned living creatures and the need to succor them, but talk like Samantabhadra’s, of how creatures were starving, was certainly a great rarity.

“It would not be right if the so-called supernatural powers I have achieved did not bestow the ability to see where people are starving. What place can there be for truth if people have nothing at all to eat? Not that creatures can live by bread alone; there also has to be the food of truth, the food of Dharma, the Dharma’s offerings of food.”

Sudhana composed a very short poem in his heart:

Without a mouthful of food to eat,  
how can compassion be received?  
How can compassion be given?  
How in mutual compassion  
can one flower emerge?

Samantabhadra had been given responsibility for delivering sermons, while the Buddha was away for a few days in company with his senior disciple, Kashyapa, the younger Ananda, and Subhuti. Now the morning sermon and the midday meal were finished, so he took Sudhana with him to a grove, where they rested their limbs and relaxed for a while.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva pillowed his head on his arm, with a sign to Sudhana to do the same. Master and teacher had become the closest of friends, in a relationship completely unmarked by formalities. Every last trace of authority and deference had melted away.

“Little bodhisattva!” Samantabhadra spoke quietly. “Just as you journeyed for so long from place to place in the southern realms, meeting teachers and attaining bodhisattva status, so I, too, have been born and have died, been reborn and died, since long ages ago, through many lives, with enlightenment as my goal. Yet on reflection, the fact that I have completed my works and vows as a bodhisattva following the Buddha amounts to nothing more than a drop of dew brought into being by long practice of devotion. You must have seen how lovely a drop of water looks as it pearls in the heart of a lotus leaf. It amounts to nothing more than that. In all that time I have seen countless Buddhas; I have attained countless enlightened hearts, performing every kind of worship and offering, practicing every kind of good wherever I went, without pause, as our breathing never stops.

“Sudhana Bodhisattva, now you have seen me, you must also see my true Buddha nature. In that way you must be born again within my dharmakaya.”

“But Bodhisattva, can I really be born again within your true nature?”

“Yes. For it is none other than Vairochana Buddha. Vairochana is the pure, essential Buddha nature.”

At that moment Sudhana saw that every one of the pores on Samantabhadra’s body, and all the minute pores hidden within his body, were each filled with innumerable Buddhas. Around each of those innumerable Buddhas, crowds were assembled like clouds. Sudhana had now become capable of seeing such microscopic realities with his ordinary, weak eyesight.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva had almost nothing left to say to Sudhana. Perhaps that was his way of transcending the distinction between emptiness and being.

“Listen carefully. Pure essential Buddha nature cannot be measured against anything or likened to anything in any world whatever. Every comparison is just so much trash, for Buddha nature transcends all worlds, beyond emptiness and being alike.

“If anything, it is like a dream, or like a picture drawn in the void. Listen carefully. Even if you could count the number of drops of water comprising each wave that breaks on the shore, could you ever count a Buddha’s meritorious achievements?

“I have one last thing to say, Sudhana. You are equal to the Buddha and all the bodhisattvas. Henceforth, the people you encounter will not be Buddhas and bodhisattvas or any kind of teacher, they will each and every one of them be a living creature that you will have to meet with wisdom and compassion.”

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva had spoken, breathing deeply between each phrase. Now he rose.

“I have finished.”

He caressed Sudhana's head one last time, then resumed his place on the lotus throne. The light shining from the bodhisattva's back as he went out into the sunlight was not a mere reflection of the sun, for mingled in it was a light shining from within himself. The result was like dazzling sunlight and subtle moonlight. Clearly, bodhisattvahood was light.

Until now, Sudhana had always known where to go next on leaving a teacher. One master had invariably indicated the next. But now he had no further need of those directions and promptings. Sudhana's lengthy journey had reached its end.

Blessing of fifty-three teachers!  
Blessing of having visited  
innumerable places!  
Now, with that blessing complete,  
blessing of the road I must pursue for myself!

Samantabhadra was an ancient bodhisattva, adorned with the accumulation of the many sacrifices he had made in many different worlds. Sudhana would imitate him in turn. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva! In him were concentrated the compassionate works found in all bodhisattvas. Among the followers of Shakyamuni Buddha, he was always to be found working in the Buddha's shadow, while the light streaming from his body was such that even his shadow dazzled every eye.

It was Samantabhadra who finally accomplished the proclamation of the Garland Sutra in the course of eight assemblies, held in seven different places. The first and second were held in the plains of north India, the third in Trayastrimsa, the fourth in Suyama-deva, the fifth in Tushita-deva, and the sixth in Paranirmita-vasavarti-deva, all in the heavens. Once his teaching had established a metaphysics capable of uniting heavens and Earth, he returned to Earth in a final act of vicarious offering, and the seventh and eighth were held here, the last in the central Indian monastery of Jetavana, where the Buddha and the first community often sojourned.

This last section of teaching even included the tale of Sudhana's lengthy pilgrimage! Now Sudhana had attained all that had been prophesied about him in the final portion of the Garland Sutra. He had nothing more to expect from Samantabhadra, the originator of the Sutra, for he had reached the state of utter liberation and detachment.

Sudhana felt a wind blowing from every direction. When he faced east, it was an east wind; if he turned to face the north, it became a north wind. When he faced south, the wind came blowing from the southern regions he had traveled through for so long. His body was wrapped in winds from the four cardinal points, from all eight directions. Sudhana stood there in the wind, in such poverty that apart from his pure being itself, there was nothing anyone could hope to receive from him. Then the winds enabled Sudhana to hear their voices. By them he came to understand that he was being called for in many parts of the world.

He perceived that the wind coming from the east was laden with the tang of the sea. That was a smell he had grown familiar with in the course of his journey up from the south along the coast of the Bengal Sea. He gazed heavenward. The sky was completely empty, with no trace of the heavenly realms. Since there was nothing stirring within his heart, of course there was nothing visible in the sky. One huge bird floated by; it was a Himalayan kite, a species that had never been known to frequent those parts. It seemed to have no intention of ever moving away. It hung poised in one spot, unfamiliar, its huge wings spread wide.

With a child's curiosity, Sudhana wondered how a bird from the Himalayan regions could possibly have flown this far. He only knew that he had recalled the sea by its smell, and by the Himalayan kite he recalled the towering mountains, that soared up and up until they touched the sky. Then, instead of heading back towards the mountains, the kite flew off eastward. With a start, the little bodhisattva realized that the kite was indicating the direction he should go. He felt intensely hungry. For no apparent reason he also felt intensely sad. Too sad to cry. That sorrow spoke to Sudhana:

Little pilgrim!  
Now  
your path  
has opened in heaven,  
has opened on Earth,  
has opened in the midst of the sea  
toward a greater land

toward a greater world  
than any you have so far attained.  
Little pilgrim!  
How could your path  
be limited to that alone?  
Ah, your path  
lies open before you—  
as multiple as the grains of sand by the Ganges,  
as long as an asankhyeya kalpa unending age,  
an ayuta myriad in number,  
an indescribable wonder,  
infinite in quantity,  
lasting a moment,  
a split second,  
one ksana flash—  
your path lies open as zero quantity.  
Ah, your path is yourself!  
Can a single hair ever grow  
anywhere on your body?  
Little pilgrim!  
For ever  
and ever the same  
little pilgrim, never growing old!  
Will there ever be,  
anywhere in this world,  
samadhi awareness as deep  
as that in your young heart?  
You, little pilgrim,  
are the first embodiment of truth.

Sudhana found himself completely alone. There was no teacher left for him to visit. His was a mature sorrow, caused by a state of masterlessness. In the end, the samadhi of Manjushri, his first teacher, and of Samantabhadra, his last, had been nothing but expedients to bring Sudhana to himself. Or had it all been nothing more than dreams?

When he had met the lady Maya, he had longed deeply to meet her son, Gautama Buddha, but now he could wait for him no longer. It was almost as though the teachers he had met had all been the Buddha. Besides, it might be several years before the Buddha returned to the community now presided over by Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. He had left to go preaching in the west, where epidemics were reportedly widespread, the roads thickly strewn with people starving in a famine resulting from recent wars. The Buddha and his companions had gone into the midst of all that suffering.

Sudhana simply told himself that he would meet the Buddha and his followers some other time, not now, and set out on his own journey. He headed east. His path lay in exactly the opposite direction from the Buddha. As the river entered its lower reaches, countless tributaries flowed into it. Downstream, the water seemed to expand, surging against the banks as if it would overflow its bounds.

“Hey, little wanderer!” A voice called him from a boat out in midstream. “If you go that way, there’s nothing but the ocean cliffs. You’d better come aboard my boat.”

The speaker was an eighty-year-old boatman, his face deeply wrinkled. The boat touched shore and Sudhana climbed in. Beneath the glow of the setting sun, the boatman spread the sail and the boat hurried seaward.